

Stuttgart in the hunt

AFP, Berlin



Stuttgart remained in the Bundesliga title race on Wednesday after Romanian striker Ciprian Marica scored the winner in a 2-1 win at Schalke to stay two points behind leaders Wolfsburg with two games left.

Energie Cottbus and Bayern in their last two games and need to finish in the top three to qualify for the Champions League. 'Now we have to be just as focused against Cottbus and then set ourselves up for the last day of the season clash with Bayern Munich. It is important to keep winning and try to get the European place.'

Hamburg are fifth, but stay five points behind the leaders and effectively out of the title race, after Croatia striker Ivica Olic netted twice as they hammered Bochum 3-0. Germany midfielder Torsten Frings scored twice, including a penalty, as Werder Bremen routed Eintracht Frankfurt 5-0 as the UEFA Cup finalists stay 10th in the league.

Wenger ready to delay United's party

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger has vowed to wreck Manchester United's plans for a Premier League title party at Old Trafford on Saturday. United need just a point from their lunchtime meeting with the Gunners to wrap up a third consecutive league triumph and equal Liverpool's record of 18 English titles.

But Wenger insists his players will be determined to delay the celebrations and claim revenge for their Champions League semifinal defeat by United, which led many to question the Frenchman's reliance on his homegrown youngsters. 'We have a very promising team who can deliver very soon,' Wenger claimed Thursday.

'We want to play for our pride and be respected for who we are, that is people who love the game they play. We promised ourselves on January 1 we would give everything in every game until the end of the season. 'That is where we can show we are capable to do that.'

Marseille step closer

AFP, Paris



Marseille and Bordeaux remained locked in the race for the French league title on Wednesday, with a victory apiece and just three matches left.

An end to end move saw home keeper Steve Mandanda feed Hatem Ben Arfa, who found Teye Taiwo down the left flank. The Nigerian quickly picked out Brandao, who nodded in as Marseille clinched their 20th league win of the campaign.

Marseille now looks too great to close even if the former can win their tussle with the former European champions. Paris Saint Germain moved to within a point of Lyon after Mateja Kezman scored Wednesday's only goal at Le Mans.

Marseille moved a step closer to their first title in 17 years after goals from Mamadou Niang and Brandao brought a 2-0 win at local rivals Nice. Bordeaux then came from behind to beat nine-man Valenciennes 2-1 to go level on 71 points, but behind on goal difference.

Niang bagged the opener for Marseille with a fine shot on the turn after 26 minutes before Brazilian Brandao, who has averaged a goal every other game since his arrival from Shakhtar Donetsk mid-season, made the points safe on the hour.

Le Havre briefly led before succumbing to late efforts from Mirallas and Riviere as the hosts suffered their 25th defeat of the season to confirm their bottom placing.



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona captain Carles Puyol celebrates with the King's Cup after their victory in the final against Athletic Bilbao at the Mestalla on Wednesday.

Barca lift Kings Cup

Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona stayed on course for an historic treble by crushing Athletic Bilbao 4-1 at the Mestalla Stadium on Wednesday to lift the Kings Cup for the first time in over a decade.

The final part of the treble - which no Spanish team has ever achieved - is the Champions League final against Manchester United on May 27. For Bilbao, who have won the cup 23 times, it was bitter disappointment in their first final since 1985.

Barcelona were without Andres Iniesta and Thierry Henry through injury so the talented Bojan, 18, started the final. At the back, Carles Puyol switched to left back to replace the suspended Eric Abidal while midfielder Toure was deployed at centre-half.

It was coach Pep Guardiola's first trophy as a manager and Barcelona's first piece of silverware in two seasons although the Spanish league title could soon follow with only a point needed at Real Mallorca on Sunday to secure a 19th championship. 'We hope it's an historic week and we will go for the second title this weekend,' said defender Gerard Pique.

There was little animosity between the two sides 25 years on although Barca were furious at the constant fouling suffered by Messi. 'If Barcelona have a weakness it is undoubtedly set-pieces and Bilbao exploited that early on with Toquero heading in a whipped-in corner after just nine minutes.'

Messi went close to scoring early in the second half and finally got his goal in the 54th minute after Bilbao failed to clear their lines. Barca turned the screw with Bojan netting three minutes later with an immaculate finish after Bilbao got caught out on the counter attack.



PHOTO: AFP

Sampdoria star Antonio Cassano (L) shrugs off Lazio defender Stephan Lichtsteiner during their Italian Cup final at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Wednesday.

ITALIAN CUP Muslera Lazio hero

Football

AFP, Rome

Lazio beat Sampdoria 6-5 on penalties following a 1-1 draw to win the Italian Cup at the Stadio Olimpico here on Wednesday and qualify for next season's Europa League. Lazio goalkeeper Nestor Muslera saved two penalties in the shoot-out, which went to sudden death after both teams missed one each of their first five.

work, I'm someone who has wanted results for so long.' It was Lazio's fifth Italian Cup success and first since 2004. Sampdoria won the last of their four cups in 1994. But their coach Walter Mazzarri was proud of his team's efforts. 'We did justice to this match, it was a final worthy of its name,' he said. 'It's very disappointing to lose a final, I'm sorry for our fans. But that's life.'

Antonio Cassano sent a deep cross over from the left to Lithuanian Marius Stankevicius at the back post and his header across goal was diverted in by Pazzini. Sampdoria came close on the stroke of half-time but Muslera tipped over Cassano's fierce free-kick. On the hour, it was Lazio who threatened again but the late arriving Pasquale Foggia couldn't control his volley from Pandev's cross.

Ireland close to new deal

INTERNET, undated

Mark Hughes has confirmed Stephen Ireland is close to agreeing a new long-term contract with Manchester City. The midfielder has been the Blues' outstanding player this term, with many observers feeling he was unfortunate to be beaten to the PFA Young Player of the Year trophy by Aston Villa's Ashley Young. And while Ireland remains indifferent about the prospect of an international comeback with the Republic of Ireland, he has expressed a desire to remain with City.

Van Gaal Bayern's

Football

AFP, Berlin

German giants Bayern Munich confirmed on Wednesday that Dutch coach Louis van Gaal will take over as head coach on July 1 having signed a two-year contract to replace the fired Jurgen Klinsmann. Having led AZ Alkmaar to the Dutch title this season, the 57-year-old has signed a deal with the Bundesliga champions, ending weeks of speculation over whether or not he would succeed Klinsmann, who was fired on April 27. 'We are happy to have signed an experienced and successful football coach for Bayern Munich such as Louis van Gaal,' said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge in a statement. 'We wanted him to come to Bayern and Louis van Gaal wanted to come to us, it was just a case of sorting out the details.'

Then followed brief spells at Ajax and Barcelona, before he joined AZ in 2005 which culminated in Alkmaar winning the Dutch title on April 19 this year just after their decisive 28-game undefeated run was brought to an end. Not lacking in self-confidence, Van Gaal boldly stated: 'I am the best' after winning the Dutch title and Bayern's bosses seem to agree. Bayern captain Mark van Bommel insisted recently: 'You won't find a player who has anything negative to say about him.'

But Rummenigge said he wanted to bring in a non-nonsense football man to forge Munich into a powerful side to challenge for their first Champions League title since 2001. 'If we had wanted someone who is everyone's darling, we would have signed George Clooney,' Rummenigge commented only a few days ago. Meanwhile, Rummenigge added that Werder Bremen midfielder Diego will not be going to Bayern with the Brazilian play-maker set to join Italian giants Juventus next season. 'I rang Klaus Allofs (Bremen's director of sport) this morning and he said there is an agreement in principle with Juventus for Diego,' said Rummenigge.



LOUIS VAN GAAL

Perez eyes comeback

AFP, Madrid

Former Real Madrid president Florentino Perez, who helped bring a host of world stars to the club including David Beckham, Thursday announced he plans to return to the post in elections next month. The hugely successful businessman said he made the decision as a result of the "serious events" at the reigning Spanish champions in recent months. Former president Ramon Calderon resigned on January 16 over allegations he rigged voting at the club's last general assembly in December, which approved its financial accounts. 'We have experienced three years of convulsion and improper behaviour at the greatest sports institution in the world,' Perez told a news conference. 'This club has always been characterised by fairness and generosity. It is a sad period that we must overcome.'

Man drowns during celebrations

AFP, Madrid

A man fell into a river and drowned and police arrested 45 people for disturbances as Barcelona supporters celebrated the club's victory in Spain's King's Cup. The Catalan giants stayed on course for an historic treble by crushing Athletic Bilbao 4-1 on Wednesday to lift the Cup for the first time in over a decade. The man of about 35 years of age died after falling into the River Onyar in the town of Girona, near Barcelona, during the victory celebrations, a police spokesman said. Around 40,000 Barca supporters gathered in the city's Plaza de Catalunya y Canaletes, where a group of about 300 began pelting police vehicles with bottles, cans and other objects, the spokesman said. Police intervened when the rioters also threw objects at other supporters, detaining 45 people, five of them minors. Medical services also treated 109 people, including 34 police officers, although none were seriously hurt.

Ajax try to lure Olsen

AFP, The Hague

Dutch league giants Ajax are hoping to lure Denmark coach Morten Olsen back to the club following the resignation last week of Marco Van Basten, according to reports Thursday. De Telegraaf newspaper said the Amsterdam club has decided to sound out Olsen following successive refusals from Co Adriaanse, Frank Rijkaard and Michael Laudrup. The 59-year-old Olsen, a former coach of Ajax from 1997 to 1999, confirmed in the report he had been contacted "by a club" but refused to say which "out of respect for the Danish federation". The Dane then evoked the possibility of combining his job with the national team with that of a club-level coach but admitted such a deal would "need the agreement of all three parties concerned". Denmark are currently well positioned to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. They sit top of Europe zone qualifying group 1 ahead of Hungary and Portugal. Also in the running to succeed Van Basten, according to reports, are Ronald Koeman, Gertjan Verbeek and Danny Blind, the club's current sports director. Van Basten stood down last week after failing to guide the Dutch giants into next year's Champions League. Despite his legendary status at the club where he made his name, Van Basten was forced to admit he "was partly responsible" for the team's results and two weeks ago asked for "a second chance" to remain at the helm.